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AUTHOR	Woodward, Robert C.
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ABSTRACT

Over time, the Regional Library Systems Act has succeeded in its aim to widen and improve access to library services for all Maine residents. Today, students in the smallest high schools and users of the most remote public libraries can plug into the resources of the largest public libraries in the state and draw on the services of their professional staffs. The Act was enacted in 1973 after a long process that began in the 1950s. Background to the development of the Regional Library Systems Act is given, and developments in interlibrary loan since the Act passed the Legislature in June 1973 are outlined. The Regional Library Systems Act has worked remarkably well. Concerns about the loss of local autonomy have been put to rest; users of local libraries and school libraries have improved access to library services when their librarians can tie into the collections of the Area Reference and Resource Centers; and local library staffs are better prepared through the support offered by the District Consultants. Unfinished business remains; a statewide borrower's card has yet to be issued, and many libraries still do not tie into the system. (AEF)

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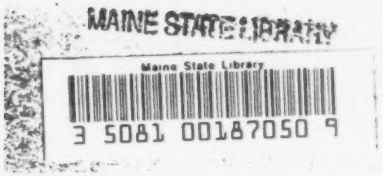

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Maine's Regional Library System: A History

by

Robert C. Woodward

February, 1999

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Introduction

The following paper was presented by Robert C. Woodward on February 24, 1999, at the Bangor Public Library during a meeting of the Executive Boards from the Central, Northeastern, and Southern Maine Library Districts. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the history and future of the Maine Regional Library System. Mr. Woodward was the first Chair of the Maine Library Commission, and a former director of the Bangor Public Library.

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MAINE'S REGIONAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

Twenty-five years ago this spring the Regional Library Systems Act began to take effect. Over time it succeeded in its aim to widen and improve access to library services for all Maine residents. Today, students in the smallest high schools and users of the most remote public libraries can plug into the resources of the largest public libraries in the state and draw on the services of their professional staffs.

The Regional Library Systems Act was enacted in 1973 after a long process that began in the 1950's. The American Library Association adopted a guide for minimum standards for public libraries in 1956 calling on all public libraries to join cooperative library systems, acknowledging that few public libraries can independently meet all the demands placed on them. By this time several states had developed regional systems and they worked well and continue to do so.

Ruth Hazelton became Maine State Librarian in 1958,

coming here from Massachusetts where regional library systems were being put in place. Working with the officers of the Maine Library Association, she asked Marion Moshier, retired head of Library Extension for the New York State Library, to survey Maine libraries and make recommendations for library development in Maine.

Moshier's 1962 report proposed that Maine consider forming 4 to 6 "District Library Systems", each based on populations of 200,000 and each centered on a strong public library. (The American Library Association minimum standards for systems called for a population base of at least 150,000 and a strong resource center with at least 100,000 non-fiction titles.) Moshier's report also called for a staff of 6 professionals and 12 non-professionals in each District. This recommendation would have more than doubled the payroll of the State Library; it was seldom mentioned again. Moshier also called for a District borrower's card for use in any member library.

At a Governor's Conference for Library Trustees held in 1963, Ruth Hazelton repeated her call for a statewide system

"which provides every citizen, regardless of where he lives, with equal access to good library service". The featured speaker at the Conference, Grace Stevenson, argued that quality library service for any but the very largest library requires membership in a co-operative library network.

In 1969, following the recommendation of the Planning and Development Committee of the Maine Library Association and of the Maine Trustees Association, Governor Curtis appointed a *Governor's Task Force to Study Library Services in Maine*. Its report, **Widening the Circle, Libraries for Tomorrow,** appeared in 1971. The Task Force called for a new kind of library service standard in Maine where a library would set its goals and measure performance not only in terms of its own resources, but in terms of how readily it is able to bring together library users and library resources from anywhere.

Specifically, the Task Force recommended a statewide borrower's card, something that always comes up when a citizen's group looks at ways to widen and improve access to library services in Maine. They called for funding for improved interli-

brary loans, the development of a union catalog, more libraries in NELINET and statewide acquisitions and cataloging. The Task Force noted that many libraries that might benefit from the interlibrary loan system already in place made little use of it, claiming that they could fill most requests from their own collections. (As many as a third of all public libraries today make little or no use of the interlibrary loan service.)

The report of the Task Force earned wide attention inside and outside the library community. The Governor promptly appointed a special committee, the Maine Library Advisory Committee, to draw up legislation to establish regional library systems, create a commission to advise the Commissioner of Education on policy matters (the State Library was then a bureau in the Department of Education), and to recommend state funding levels.

By the beginning of the Legislative session in 1972-73 the Advisory Committee had its recommendations nearly ready. One big issue was in dispute: how many regional systems should it recommend for Maine? Should we have 8 regional systems

or fewer than that or as many as 25? The proposal for 8 Districts, as they came to be called, was supported by those who were impressed by the State Planning Office division of the State into 8 planning and development districts. Others were taken by the argument of the Commissioner of Education that it would be a great idea to establish Districts in parallel with areas served by the 25 vocational and technical high schools.

The guidelines of the American Library Association and studies of library systems reported in library literature all called for systems - or Districts - to be based on populations of at least 200,000 with a central resource library holding at least 100,000 non-fiction titles. Only two of the 8 Districts proposed had a population base over 150,000 (one had only 65,000) and only three had a resource center with 100,000 non-fiction titles. The 25 District proposal had a kind of handsome symmetry but only one Advisory Committee member took it seriously.

Regional meetings were held around the state to discuss the proposed legislation. There was general approval of the idea of regional systems, consultant services, council representation

and expanded services. The 250 who attended hearings around the state offered little advice on the matter of how many districts should be designated. In the end, the Advisory Committee left it to the new Library Commission to designate the district boundaries and the Area Reference and Resource Centers.

In the hearings there was some opposition to the regional concept. Opponents argued that local libraries would be submerged in the regional organization, losing autonomy, identity and even some local funding. One distinguished citizen prominent in Maine's cultural life, patiently pointed out that we were innocently creating the means for the state library bureaucrats to take control of local libraries. He and other opponents (only two appeared at the legislative hearings) were assured that the regional systems were designed not to govern libraries but to channel services to them.

About this time Ruth Hazelton retired. She had been a strong defender of local library autonomy and a champion of the regional concept. Her successor, Gary Nichols, has also shown the same concerns and his efforts have been a major factor in

the success of the Regional Library Systems Act.

The Act passed the Legislature in June, 1973, and took effect in October. The Governor appointed members to the new Library Commission and they met for the first time in December, 1973. The first order of business was to designate the number and boundaries of the Districts. Some of the new Commission members had served on the Advisory Committee and it was unanimously agreed that three Districts, with nearly equal populations, based on the three strong collections of the Portland, Bangor and Maine State Library best met the criteria established by the American Library Association.

District Councils held their first meetings in the Spring of 1974 and by year's end Consultants had been hired in the Central and Southern Maine Library Districts. The three Area Reference and Resource Centers began interlibrary loan and reference support services at once and within a few years ILL activity doubled and then doubled again. In 1975 the Library Commission approved funding for OCLC access at the three

ARRCs. This farsighted recommendation by State Librarian Nichols meant that Portland and Bangor would be only the second and third public libraries in New England to tie into OCLC and it positioned Maine for major benefits in all areas of automation.

Within ten years Maine's public and school libraries were generating over 40,000 interlibrary loans. (It is now over 50,000.) This put Maine among the top states nationally and first among New England states in interlibrary loan activity. Journalists, legislators, other lay people and even some librarians are quick to point out that Maine is a poor state with many small libraries; of course it has high ILL activity for just those reasons. Not so. The reasons are counter-intuitive. High ILL activity is characteristic of states with high levels of library expenditures and high levels of circulation - states such as Connecticut, New York, Illinois, Iowa and, yes, Maine, whose per capita expenditures and circulation activity are above the median for all states. Low levels of ILL activity are associated with states where per capita expenditures and circulation are low -

states such as Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas. The same correlations show up when we look at interlibrary loan activity within Maine. Libraries with the highest levels of per capita expenditures and circulation are almost always the libraries with the highest levels of interlibrary loan activity. The libraries in Hancock County, for instance, are among the heaviest users of the ILL network. Blue Hill, Bar Harbor, Castine, Ellsworth, Northeast, and Southwest Harbor also have the highest per capita expenditures among most of the libraries in their population groups.

The Regional Library Systems Act has worked remarkably well. Certainly the concerns about the loss of local autonomy have been put to rest. Users of local libraries and school libraries have improved access to library services when their librarians can tie into the collections and reference staffs of the Area Reference and Resource Centers. Local library staffs are better prepared through the support offered by the District Consultants. There is still some unfinished business - a statewide borrower's card, for instance. Many libraries do not tie into the

system. They seldom use interlibrary loan services and they seldom call for reference help. What can be done to widen and improve access to library services for residents of those Maine towns?

Robert C. Woodward

February 17, 1999